

Open Distance Learning: Accelerator for Africa's Development

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(Speech is preceded by the ICDE DVD that also introduces and gives an overview of Unisa.)

Programme Facilitator,

The President of the University of Delaware

Honoured host

The leadership of the University of Delaware,

Educational leaders from neighbouring and other educational institutions,

Representatives of the state and local government,

Officials from civic and non-governmental organizations present here today,

Community leaders,

Students,

Respected guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to express my gratitude for the warm reception I have received which is also an indication of the positive reception that University of South Africa (Unisa) has received. The fact that the World Conference of the International Council for Open and Distance Learning will be hosted by my university is an affirmation of this warm embrace that we have received from our colleagues from around the world. It will be for the first time that an African University will be hosting such an event on the African continent. This is also a recognition of the fact that University of South Africa is one of the global leaders in Open and Distance Learning with a continental and global footprint as well as pioneering history in many areas as the short video has also highlighted.

It is indeed an honour to be part of your esteemed institution's Africa month celebrations and I bring you warm greetings from the University of South Africa, and the people of my country. I also bring warm spirit from the African continent which is the cradle of humankind. Special greetings to our brothers and sisters from the African diaspora in the audience here today. I join you today as you embrace Spring season marked by the blooming and blossoming of a kaleidoscope of flowery colours of nature. It is, according to the African tradition, a season of hope where nature yields and nourishes. I also come from South Africa where it is Autumn season, again a season of harvest which is equally important in the African traditional calendar with all the ceremonies to celebrate harvest. Today is the meeting of two most important seasons especially in the African traditions and this also signals the symbolic importance of our interactions today with arms of friendship stretched across the Atlantic Ocean.

As we reflect today I am immediately reminded of the important contribution of the African civilization through various epochs of human history, something that is not properly exposed in our mainstream literature. When I reflect on that rich heritage and emerging opportunities for an African Renaissance in the 21st century I feel proud to be an African. I am mindful of the fact that some of you may wonder how such optimism come from in the midst of recent tragic incidents on the continent of Africa. Yes indeed, we have witnessed tragic incidents such as the kidnapping of girls by the Boko Haram in the northern region of Nigeria, we have seen the cold-blooded murder of 148 students at Garrisa University College in Kenya, the xenophobic attacks

in South Africa, the civil war in Libya and the Central African Republic, and indeed we continue to receive heart-wrenching stories of African and Middle East refugees fleeing conflict zones and drowning in their hundreds in the Mediterranean Sea. Indeed, Africa is vast and complex hence it is always unwise to essentialise this great continent whenever something happens in any region.

But in the same vain economists, development experts and many investors have noted that Africa, the second largest continent in the world, is rising in the midst of the aforementioned challenges. Some of the important indicators that they highlight include:

1. Africa is, on average, one of the fastest growing regions in economic terms albeit from a low base.
2. Africa boasts demographic dividends that include a relatively young population that is increasingly more educated middle class.
3. Africa today holds the largest reserves of natural resources and arable land than anywhere else in the world.
4. The African continent is increasingly becoming a serious player in the space of innovation in science, engineering and arts.

It is for these reasons that both emerging global markets, especially BRICS countries, and old developed economies have been reaching out to invest in the African continent. Global corporate powerhouses such as Microsoft and Samsung are investing in the African continent on an unprecedented scale.

On the occasion of the adoption of South Africa's democratic post-apartheid Constitution in 1996, the former President Thabo Mbeki captured the mood and the African moment with a profoundly perceptive depiction of the African continent when he proclaimed the shared suffering, African continent's triumph over adversity and the spirit of perseverance and determined hope that prevailed against all odds.

Former President Thabo Mbeki said,

"I am an African.

I am born of the peoples of the continent of Africa.

The pain of the violent conflict that the peoples of Liberia, Somalia, the Sudan, Burundi and Algeria is a pain I also bear.

The dismal shame of poverty, suffering and human degradation of my continent is a blight that we share.

The blight on our happiness that derives from this and from our drift to the periphery of the ordering of human affairs leaves us in a persistent shadow of despair. This is a savage road to which nobody should be condemned.

Whatever the setbacks of the moment, nothing can stop us now! Whatever the difficulties, Africa shall be at peace! However improbable it may sound to the sceptics, Africa will prosper!

Whoever we may be, whatever our immediate interest, however much we carry baggage from our past, however much we have been caught by the fashion of cynicism and loss of faith in the capacity of the people, let us err today and say - nothing can stop us now!"

It is with this consciousness and spirit that the University of South Africa (Unisa), our government, all higher education institutions in the country as well as organized business and civil society at large strongly condemned the xenophobic attacks by a few criminal elements in a society that is otherwise generally welcoming of its foreign nationals.

We are of the strong view that South Africa is a nation premised on the practice of Ubuntu/botho and good neighbourliness with one another as citizens, with the whole of Africa as our fellow brothers and sisters and the world at large as members of the same human race.

In our condemnation of acts of violence against fellow Africans I said it behoves on all of us to remember the hospitality and shelter afforded by African countries to South African freedom fighters of yesteryear when we sought refuge in flight from the oppressive regime of the time. We are reminded of the fact that we are beneficiaries of international solidarity in our struggle against apartheid and that will always be the memory of our gratitude etched in our hearts. It cannot, and it must not be, that when it is our turn to give shelter to our brothers and sisters, we instead worsen their lot with such despicable acts of intolerance, inhumanity and violence. What we are doing as a people is a betrayal of what our founding father, the late President Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, and his generation stood for.

Needless to say, our government is hard at work to stamp out these acts of criminality and to assist fellow Africans to restore their lives in the spirit of Ubuntu.

Let me now return to one of the primary reasons why today it feels good to be an African.

Africa has become a good news story. Analysts have noted that a new wave of optimism is sweeping across the continent¹ and that this has to do with the continent's good economic performance. Africa's growth has accelerated by an average of 5.7% since 2000, making it one of the fastest growing regions in the world, and increasingly an attractive investment destination.

Notable in this context is the significant economic growth and huge international investments in developments in South Africa, Mozambique, Namibia, Botswana, Ghana, Nigeria and Angola in recent years. With the United States, United Kingdom, Germany and China among the biggest investors in Africa.

Although these levels of growth are not uniform across all of Africa's sub-regions, "at the current rate domestic gross domestic product (GDP) will reach 2.6 trillion US dollars by 2020"² This is set to be underpinned by a youthful population that is rapidly urbanising and increasingly educated according to a report by the McKinsey Global Institute³.

It is the "increasingly educated population" that the McKinsey Report refers to that warrants further scrutiny. It is an accepted fact that Africa is endowed with abundant natural resources – from precious metals and minerals to crude oil -- hence the significant international investments that I have referred to earlier. But the bulk of these centres around African economies that are still heavily reliant on exports of primary resources. Furthermore, this abundance of natural resources has not lifted its population out of poverty. And herein sits one of our biggest challenges. One that we can tackle with a song of innovation in our hearts in our quest to rejuvenate Africa, or a challenge that can leave us with a debilitating sense of paralysis. Fact is that most African countries feature very low on the Human Development Index of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), which measures life expectancy,

¹ Mark Swilling. Resource Productivity and Decoupling. Policy brief for the 7th meeting of the International Panel for Sustainable Resource Management of the United Nations Environment Program.

² Mark Swilling and Eve Annecke. 2012. Just Transitions – Explorations of sustainability in an unfair world. UCT Press. p.186

³ McKinsey Global Institute. 2010. Lions on the move: The progress and potential of African economies. Online: www.mckinsey.com/mgi

education and GDP. Of the world's 43 least-developed countries in terms of education 33 are African⁴.

From all the analyses across the world, particularly in studies on development in Asian countries, it has been conclusively proven that education forms a critical pillar of sustainable human development. Africa is no exception.

In this regard I'd like to remind you that Manuel Castells, the world renowned Spanish sociologist, described universities "as the engines of development". In a lecture on Higher Education in 2009 at the University of the Western Cape he said:

"In the current condition of the global knowledge economy, knowledge production and technological innovation become the most important productive forces. So, without at least some level of national research system, which is comprised of universities, the private sector, public research centers and external funding, no country, even the smallest country, can really participate in the global knowledge economy."⁵

The University of South Africa, like all universities in Africa, squarely endorses the "engine of development role". The size and scope of Unisa in the South African higher education landscape and its unique position in terms of open distance learning locates the university in a special position to not only influence the evolution and realization of development in South Africa, but across the entire continent. [The video insert that I have used as an introduction to my speech provided ample evidence in this regard.]

Given the fact that the resources of all African states to provide in the growing need for higher education are severely challenged and the corporate sector's ability to transcend its profit-seeking motives is equally constrained, with few exceptions off course, institutions such as Unisa plays a vital strategic role as catalysts for such development. The key here is being agile and responsive to the needs and requirements of a developing Africa. Moreover, as pointed out by scores of scholars in the past, it requires strategic cross-border and global partnerships for development.

⁴ United Nations Development Report. 2014.

⁵ Manuel Castells. 2009. The role of universities in development, the economy and society. Paper delivered at the University of the Western Cape. 7 August 2009.

A call for responsive African universities is captured in the following observation by Olukoshi and Zeleza in their book *African Universities in the twenty-first century*⁶ when they say:

In the face of a rapidly globalising and technologically intensive world, traditional disciplinary boundaries are crumbling and new interdisciplinary configurations and research agendas are developing that require new organizational forms of knowledge production, dissemination, and consumption. Similarly, new local-level and transnational alliances in the higher education sector are emerging, designed to take advantage of openings offered by processes of globalization and to force reconstruction of the basic principles that underpin the entire higher education system.

It is in this spirit and conviction that the University of South Africa has purposefully pursued new opportunities for innovation in teaching and learning for human development to give concrete and practical expression to our vision statement of shaping futures in the service of humanity.

One such “opening offered by the processes of globalization” is President Barack Obama’s Young African Leadership Initiative offered via the Regional Leadership Centre Southern Africa (hosted at UNISA) to develop African young leaders in Business and Entrepreneurship Development, Civic Leadership; and Governance and Public Management through a hybrid of innovative and complimentary placements and experiential learning.

Another initiative is the creation of the Pan African Virtual University under the auspices of the African Union Commission to support the realization of Africa’s Agenda 2063. The University of South Africa is a seminal partner in this innovative platform to address the ever increasing need for higher education on the African continent. My university entered into a historic and unprecedented partnership when it signed the Memorandum of Understanding with the African Union Commission on 13 October 2014 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Let me briefly deal with each of them in turn:

⁶ Zeleza P and Olukoshi, A. (eds) (2004), *African Universities in the twenty-first century*. CODESRIA Book Series. Unisa Press

The Young African Leadership Initiative

As you probably know, President Obama appointed the University of South Africa to host one of the five Regional Leadership Centres in Africa to drive his Young African Leaders Initiative on the basis of its continental leadership in Open Distance Learning, the state of the art facilities at its business school, as well as its extensive involvement in the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

The Regional Leadership Centre (South Africa) has aligned itself with the core principles of President Obama's YALI objectives that seek to:

- Invest in the new generation of young African leaders who will shape Africa's future
- Respond to the strong demand by young African leaders for practical skills that can help them take their work to the next level in the fields of public service and business
- Deepen partnerships and connections between Africa and the United States
- Build a prestigious network of young African leaders who are at the forefront of change and innovation in their respective sectors.

The overarching objective of the Regional Leadership Centre (South Africa) is to provide the platform and tools for empower dynamic young Africans and to awaken their innate leadership potential to the benefit of Africa and its global partners.

In collaboration with the University of Pretoria, the Innovation Hub and private commercial partners the Regional Leadership Centre from its hub at the Unisa Business Leadership School, will develop 21st Century skills that are indispensable for participation and achievement in the global knowledge economy, by developing critical thinking skills, problem-solving abilities, entrepreneurial thinking, communication and multicultural collaboration with a focus on contemporary African issues.

Due to the multi-country nature of the programme, technology will be an integral part of the training and it will also be employed to allow different experts and the youth to collaborate via virtual platforms.

The modules of all the programmes are developed and made available as open educational resources and a Computer Mediated Professional Development approach is utilized as a means of keeping participants and academics engaged during the training in residence and even after the residence period when participants return to their homes across Southern Africa. That this programme was developed and has honoured our founding president and the global icon, Nelson Mandela, is a fitting tribute as he had passion for education and young people. The following statement is reflective of his commitment as he proclaimed that,

“Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, that the son of a mine worker can become the head of the mine, that a child of farm workers can become the president of a great nation. It is what we make out of what we have, not what we are given, that separates one person from another.” (Nelson Mandela, Long Walk to Freedom, 1995).

The Regional Leadership Centre Southern Africa (hosted at UNISA) will thus develop African young leaders in Business and Entrepreneurship Development, Civic Leadership; and Governance and Public Management through a hybrid of innovative and complimentary placements and experiential learning. I also liken this programme to the Peace Corps that the former president of the USA, John Kennedy, developed in the early 1960s and it spread goodwill across the world utilizing cultural diplomacy of building ties amongst the people of the world.

The Pan-African Virtual University

Over the last few months the University of South Africa and key partners in African higher education have been working purposefully to create the Pan African Virtual University with the mandate of significantly increasing access to quality higher education and training through the innovative use of information communication technologies.

The other key partners are:

- **The African Council for Distance Education (ACDE)**, a continental educational organization comprising African universities and other higher education institutions, that are committed to expanding access to quality education and training through open and distance learning;
- **The Association of African Universities (AAU)**: who represents the voice of higher education in Africa on regional and international bodies and supports networking by universities in teaching, research and information exchange and dissemination.
- **The African Academy of Sciences (AAS)** who aims to be the engine for driving scientific and technological development in Africa; and
- **Open Resources Africa**: who plays a leading role in supporting higher education institutions across Africa in the development and use of Open Educational Resources (OER) to enhance teaching and learning.

The Pan-African Virtual University will be a dedicated Pan-African University operating through open distance and e-learning (ODEL) for the benefit of the African continent. It will provide access to a geographically remote and dispersed student population and to those who have been marginalised from Higher Education opportunities.

As such it will use the full spectrum of instruments available to present and deliver course material – including multimedia (audio and visual); ICT (Online and offline eLearning), as well as Blended learning (a combination of print, technology and face to face interaction in the learning situation).

The Pan African Virtual University will naturally focus on high impact programmes to support Agenda 2063 and will deliver and certify full qualifications and Short Courses.

Programme Director, Africa has more than 800 universities and around 1500 institutions of higher learning, with the percentage of private universities sharply increasing in recent years. And with an estimated population of around one billion people, of which the youth constitutes 60% of the unemployed⁷, it is not rocket science to realize that innovative and pioneering

⁷ Jegede Olugbemiro. The Status of Higher Education in Africa. Paper delivered at the Institute of International Education. New York. 1 February 2012

partnerships such as the two that I have mentioned, facilitated by technological advances of the digital age are bound to become the bedrock of development in Africa and elsewhere in the world. Open Distance Learning is thus poised to become not only a key driver, but an accelerator of development of the human resource capacity of Africa going forward.

I guess the challenge for all higher education institutions, particularly in Africa, is our agility and ability to *“take advantage of openings offered by processes of globalization and to force reconstruction of the basic principles that underpin the entire higher education system.”*

At the heart of all this is cracking the paradox that afflicts many universities, that of tenaciously clinging to the conventional ways of doing things or preserving the status quo when they are assumed to be centres of innovation and theatres of experimentation of new solutions.

These habitual tendencies are best apprehended by Samuel Johnson’s simple and yet profound statement *“The chains of habit are too light to be felt until they are too heavy to be broken.”* Until there is a radical rapture of the chains of using the same methods in resolving new problems there will be little prospect for innovative solutions and a new deal for our students.

The challenge of our time is that the world is globalized and more integrated through communication and transport technologies but our efforts for advancement of humanity, of social justice and inclusive development is needed now more than ever before. Open and Distance Learning model present a range of opportunities in this regard and the University of South Africa, working with partner institutions like you, stands ready to deliver on these goals.

I thank you.

References:

1. Mark Swilling. Resource Productivity and Decoupling. Policy brief for the 7th meeting of the International Panel for Sustainable Resource Management of the United Nations Environment Program.
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3. McKinsey Global Institute. 2010. Lions on the move: The progress and potential of African economies. Online: www.mckinsey.com/mgi.
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